

131hh- Even Being A Layman Does Not Justify Your Sensuality

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(A Summarised Transcription of a Hillside Hermitage Dhamma Talk)

The practice starts by learning what the Buddha taught.

For a person who is interested in following the Buddha's instruction, it is important to start reading the discourses that contain that instruction. Equally important is to continue reading them; [not so much in the sense of reading enormous quantities of discourses, but in the sense of re-reading and studying again those that you read.]

This is because the discourses can be understood according to many layers of meaning: the first time you read a sutta, you might feel inspired and it makes some sense; but if you make a practice of reading a discourse more than once, you will quickly realise that there is something further to be understood within the original meaning that you might have gleaned. Although the previous understanding might have been correct, it can be taken further. You can never know too much in terms of the Buddha's instruction.

This is important to recognize, because the more you know, the more likely you are to be applying yourself to the practice correctly. This means that you are in turn more likely to discern those things [that are referred to in the discourses] within your own experience.

So it is important to practice learning. However, in order for what is learned to be applicable, virtue and sense restraint need to be fully established: and that is the main point [that is often overlooked]. Often people differentiate between "practice for lay people" and "practice for monks". It is true that there is a difference in terms of the external statement and the particular lifestyle, but in terms of practice, the important distinction is between living involved with sensuality, and living without it.

Lay life does not equal sensual life.

Usually, it is true, a layperson is a person who lives with sensuality; and monks are those practicing restraint. [However 'being a layperson' and 'living with sensuality' are two entirely separate things; one does not need to imply the other.] It is important to make this distinction. If someone (wishing to seriously practice Buddhism) chooses to live as a layperson for whatever reason, this does *not* automatically imply that they don't need to practice sense restraint.

Quite often I would hear people saying something like "I cannot be a monk, because I have to look after my mother." [Their implicit conclusion to this is] "... and therefore because I have a good reason not to be a monk, I can also engage in sensuality by default."

That is completely wrong thinking. It is one decision to pursue the lifestyle of a layperson as opposed to that of a monk. The decision to, on top of this, neglect sense restraint - or to practice it only partially - has nothing to do with the choice of being a layman.

You are always responsible for acting out of sensuality. This is what you are choosing to ignore by equating laylife with sensual life. The same problem of avoiding responsibility can often cause somebody to become a monk, but then to expect the circumstances and environment to do the sense restraint for them. That is, they make no effort to uproot sensuality internally on the level of

the mind, so although they are not engaging in sensual activity with their body, they remain very much within the sensual domain.

Possibility of lay Dhamma practice does not mean possibility of sensual practice

There are discourses in which laypeople understood the Dhamma. However, it is very important to see that they certainly did not understand the Dhamma on account of a sensual life. Whenever people who were not monks understood the Dhamma, it was through being withdrawn from sensuality as a necessary condition. Even if they decided to go back to sensuality afterwards, that would always have to be done at the expense of the practice. Sensuality is always in direct contradiction to the principles of the Dhamma that need to be understood; you cannot have both.

Due to complacency, a person might become content with what they have understood and not make any further effort, but the Buddha would always admonish people in such cases and urge them not to be complacent. So if complacency is ill-advised even for somebody with a considerable attainment - what is to be said about attempting to develop that attainment with the attitude of complacency as your starting point? The idea that "I am fine in whatever environment I am in, and sensuality is not a problem for me," is entirely wrong thinking according to the principles of Dhamma. Sensuality is always a problem.

The decision to remain as a layperson is already a serious compromise

Another point to consider is that even the decision to remain as a layperson is already not something to be taken lightly. If you want to understand the Dhamma, you need to live withdrawn from sensuality, which is certainly easier to do if you are not a layperson living an ordinary lay lifestyle. This means that if you choose to live as a layperson, you are adding another extra task for yourself on top of trying to understand the Dhamma: namely sense restraint amidst the environment which does anything but encourage sense restraint. This is very hard to sustain, which is exactly why people tend to turn a blind eye to the fact that they are responsible for the choice of their environment, and just go with it.

Back in the Buddha's day, if someone remained as a layperson rather than going forth on account of their confidence in the Buddha's teaching, this was nearly always rooted in some necessity; such as looking after children or dependents who would not be able to survive alone. It was not just that others would be upset if they were not there; it was that they would literally die without them.

If somebody did not go forth only because they were protecting other people's lives, they did not take their duty towards family as an excuse to also live a sensual life. They would continue to practice [sense restraint], as laypeople.

Mountain sutta

"...Aggivessana, it's as if there were a great mountain and two companions would go to that mountain. On arrival, one of the companions would stay at the foot of the mountain, and one would climb to the top. The companion staying at the foot of the mountain would ask the companion standing on top, 'What do you see, my friend, standing on top of the mountain?'

"He would say, 'I see delightful parks, delightful forests, delightful stretches of land, and delightful lakes.'

“The other would say, ‘It’s impossible, my friend. It cannot happen that standing on top of the mountain you would see delightful parks, delightful forests, delightful stretches of land, & delightful lakes.’

“Then the companion standing on top, descending to the foot of the mountain and grabbing his companion by the arm, would make him climb to the top. After letting him catch his breath for a moment, he would ask him, ‘What do you see, my friend, standing on top of the mountain?’

“He would say, ‘I see delightful parks, delightful forests, delightful stretches of land, and delightful lakes.’

“The other would say, ‘But just now didn’t you say, “It’s impossible, my friend. It cannot happen, that standing on top of the mountain you would see delightful parks, delightful forests, delightful stretches of land, and delightful lakes”? Yet now I understand you to say, “I see delightful parks, delightful forests, delightful stretches of land, and delightful lakes.”’

“The other would say, ‘But that’s because I was standing blocked by this great mountain and didn’t see.’

“In the same way, Aggivessana, Prince Jayasena is blocked, obstructed, impeded, and enveloped by the even greater mass of ignorance. For him, living amid sensuality, enjoying sensuality, consumed by thoughts of sensuality, burning with the fever of sensuality, intent on the search for sensuality, to know or see or realize that which is to be known through renunciation, seen through renunciation, attained through renunciation, realized through renunciation: That’s impossible. ...” - [Mn125](#)

So the point to recognise is that your criteria for what is right and possible are not necessarily correct from the point of view that you have at the bottom of the mountain. Refusing to climb, for whatever reason, does not give you the excuse to indulge in whatever is at the bottom of the mountain. Again, it doesn't matter whether you wear robes or not: what matters is whether you are physically withdrawn from sensuality; whether you accept it on the mental level and whether you are practicing sense restraint for the goal of overcoming it.

Most important of all is to take responsibility for your choices, [including the choice to remain as a layperson.] Otherwise, you will not feel responsible for engaging in sensuality, because you already have not taken responsibility for choosing not to climb the mountain; not to go into the higher environment. If you do take responsibility for that choice and fully consider it, you can see that it is indeed still possible to practice, but far from the choice of environment being an excuse for carelessness, you know that you are making a compromise and therefore you have to be twice as careful at the bottom of the mountain.

If you think, "I am not at the top and therefore I can fully indulge and engage with whatever comes my way down here at the bottom," that is a whole other layer of sensuality and self-deception, on top of a decision that is already a compromise.

What is the degree of sense restraint that is the necessary basis for the practice?

The practice starts by learning [what the practice is]. This has to involve realising that there is no possibility for understanding anything that has been learned unless there is a proper basis of virtue developed, and a proper establishment of sense restraint. In concrete terms, this means keeping more than the five precepts - at minimum it means being celibate and eating for the right reasons.

Even back in the Buddha's day, the five precepts were not sufficient for developing the right view. Rather, they were and remain a non-negotiable basis for the arising of a human life. In other words, if you do not want to live like an animal, then the five precepts are the threshold below which you cannot go. Yes, five precepts do offer some improvement to an unrestrained mind, but if you want to understand the Dhamma or discern the sign of your mind, (the necessary condition for sotapatti, i.e. the right view) then the mind needs to be fully withdrawn from sensuality. It needs to be celibate, and not entertaining sensual options throughout the day.

So if you can sustain that degree of carefulness and restraint in the environment at the bottom of the mountain - that's fine, but you should recognise that this is not at all an easy thing to do. Even back in the Buddha's day it was hard to sustain, without all the various easy options for distraction that we have today. To sustain such restraint today in such a sensual pressuring environment, you will need to possess some serious willpower. If you were to possess such willpower, then actually there would be nothing binding you to the bottom of that mountain anyway. You would have already overcome it and moved to a better place.

Mn81: With Ghaṭikāra

“So I have heard. At one time the Buddha was wandering in the land of the Kosalans together with a large Saṅgha of mendicants. Then the Buddha left the road, and at a certain spot, he smiled. Then Venerable Ānanda thought, “What is the cause, what is the reason why the Buddha smiled? Realized Ones do not smile for no reason.” So Ānanda got up from his seat, arranged his robe over one shoulder, raised his joined palms toward the Buddha, and said, “What is the cause, what is the reason why the Buddha smiled? Realized Ones do not smile for no reason.”

“Once, Ānanda, there was a market town in this spot named Vebhaliṅga. It was prosperous and full of people. And Kassapa, a blessed one, a perfected one, a fully awakened Buddha, lived supported by Vebhaliṅga. It was here, in fact, that he had his monastery, where he sat and advised the mendicant Saṅgha.” Then Ānanda spread out his outer robe folded in four and said to the Buddha, “Well then, sir, may the Blessed One sit here! Then this piece of land will have been occupied by two perfected ones, fully awakened Buddhas.” The Buddha sat on the seat spread out. When he was seated he said to Venerable Ānanda:

“Once, Ānanda, there was a market town in this spot named Vebhaliṅga. It was prosperous and full of people. And Kassapa, a blessed one, a perfected one, a fully awakened Buddha, lived supported by Vebhaliṅga. It was here, in fact, that he had his monastery, where he sat and advised the mendicant Saṅgha.

The Buddha Kassapa had as a chief supporter in Vebhaliṅga a potter named Ghaṭikāra. Ghaṭikāra had a dear friend named Jotipāla, a brahmin student. Then Ghaṭikāra addressed Jotipāla, ‘Come, dear Jotipāla, let's go to see the Blessed One Kassapa, the perfected one, the fully awakened Buddha. For I regard it as holy to see that Blessed One.’

When he said this, Jotipāla said to him, ‘Enough, dear Ghaṭikāra. What’s the use of seeing that bald, fake ascetic?’

For a second time ... and a third time, Ghaṭikāra addressed Jotipāla, ‘Come, dear Jotipāla, let’s go to see the Blessed One Kassapa, the perfected one, the fully awakened Buddha. For I regard it as holy to see that Blessed One.’

For a third time, Jotipāla said to him, ‘Enough, dear Ghaṭikāra. What’s the use of seeing that bald, fake ascetic?’

‘Well then, dear Jotipāla, let’s take some bathing paste of powdered shell and go to the river to bathe.’

‘Yes, dear,’ replied Jotipāla. So that’s what they did.

Then Ghaṭikāra addressed Jotipāla, ‘Dear Jotipāla, the Buddha Kassapa’s monastery is not far away. Let’s go to see the Blessed One Kassapa, the perfected one, the fully awakened Buddha. For I regard it as holy to see that Blessed One.’

When he said this, Jotipāla said to him, ‘Enough, dear Ghaṭikāra. What’s the use of seeing that bald, fake ascetic?’

For a second time ... and a third time, Ghaṭikāra addressed Jotipāla, ‘Dear Jotipāla, the Buddha Kassapa’s monastery is not far away. Let’s go to see the Blessed One Kassapa, the perfected one, the fully awakened Buddha. For I regard it as holy to see that Blessed One.’

For a third time, Jotipāla said to him, ‘Enough, dear Ghaṭikāra. What’s the use of seeing that bald, fake ascetic?’

Then Ghaṭikāra grabbed Jotipāla by the belt and said, ‘Dear Jotipāla, the Buddha Kassapa’s monastery is not far away. Let’s go to see the Blessed One Kassapa, the perfected one, the fully awakened Buddha. For I regard it as holy to see that Blessed One.’

So Jotipāla undid his belt and said to Ghaṭikāra, ‘Enough, dear Ghaṭikāra. What’s the use of seeing that bald, fake ascetic?’

Then Ghaṭikāra grabbed Jotipāla by the hair of his freshly-washed head and said, ‘Dear Jotipāla, the Buddha Kassapa’s monastery is not far away. Let’s go to see the Blessed One Kassapa, the perfected one, the fully awakened Buddha. For I regard it as holy to see that Blessed One.’

Then Jotipāla thought, ‘It’s incredible, it’s amazing, how this potter Ghaṭikāra, though born in a lower caste, should presume to grab me by the hair of my freshly-washed head! This must be no ordinary matter.’ He said to Ghaṭikāra, ‘You’d even milk it to this extent, dear Ghaṭikāra?’

‘I even milk it to this extent, dear Jotipāla. For that is how holy I regard it to see that Blessed One.’

‘Well then, dear Ghaṭikāra, release me, we shall go.’

Then Ghaṭikāra the potter and Jotipāla the brahmin student went to the Buddha Kassapa. Ghaṭikāra bowed and sat down to one side, but Jotipāla exchanged greetings with the Buddha and sat down to one side.

Ghaṭikāra said to the Buddha Kassapa, ‘Sir, this is my dear friend Jotipāla, a brahmin student. Please teach him the Dhamma.’ Then the Buddha Kassapa educated, encouraged, fired up, and inspired Ghaṭikāra and Jotipāla with a Dhamma talk. Then they got up from their seat, bowed, and respectfully circled the Buddha Kassapa, keeping him on their right, before leaving.

Then Jotipāla said to Ghaṭikāra, ‘Dear Ghaṭikāra, you have heard this teaching, so why don’t you go forth from the lay life to homelessness?’

‘Don’t you know, dear Jotipāla, that I look after my blind old parents?’

‘Well then, dear Ghaṭikāra, I shall go forth from the lay life to homelessness.’

Then Ghaṭikāra and Jotipāla went to the Buddha Kassapa, bowed, and sat down to one side. Ghaṭikāra said to the Buddha Kassapa, ‘Sir, this is my dear friend Jotipāla, a brahmin student. Please give him the going forth.’ And Jotipāla the brahmin student received the going forth, the ordination in the Buddha’s presence.

Not long after Jotipāla’s ordination, a fortnight later, the Buddha Kassapa—having stayed in Vebhalinga as long as he wished—set out for Benares. Traveling stage by stage, he arrived at Benares, where he stayed near Benares, in the deer park at Isipatana. King Kikī of Kāsi heard that he had arrived. He had the finest carriages harnessed. He then mounted a fine carriage and, along with other fine carriages, set out in full royal pomp from Benares to see the Buddha Kassapa. He went by carriage as far as the terrain allowed, then descended and approached the Buddha Kassapa on foot. He bowed and sat down to one side. The Buddha educated, encouraged, fired up, and inspired him with a Dhamma talk.

Then King Kikī said to the Buddha, ‘Sir, would the Buddha together with the mendicant Saṅgha please accept tomorrow’s meal from me?’ The Buddha Kassapa consented in silence.

Then, knowing that the Buddha had consented, King Kikī got up from his seat, bowed, and respectfully circled the Buddha, keeping him on his right, before leaving. And when the night had passed, King Kikī had a variety of delicious foods prepared in his own home—soft saffron rice with the dark grains picked out, served with many soups and sauces. Then he had the Buddha informed of the time, saying, ‘Sir, it’s time. The meal is ready.’

Then Kassapa Buddha robed up in the morning and, taking his bowl and robe, went to the home of King Kikī, where he sat on the seat spread out, together with the Saṅgha of mendicants. Then King Kikī served and satisfied the mendicant Saṅgha headed by the Buddha with his own hands with a variety of delicious foods.

When the Buddha Kassapa had eaten and washed his hand and bowl, King Kikī took a low seat and sat to one side. There he said to the Buddha Kassapa, ‘Sir, may the Buddha please accept my invitation to reside in Benares for the rainy season. The Saṅgha will be looked after in the same style.’

‘Enough, great king. I have already accepted an invitation for the rains residence.’

For a second time ... and a third time King Kikī said to the Buddha Kassapa, ‘Sir, may the Buddha please accept my invitation to reside in Benares for the rainy season. The Saṅgha will be looked after in the same style.’

‘Enough, Great King. I have already accepted an invitation for the rains residence.’

Then King Kikī, thinking, ‘The Buddha does not accept my invitation to reside for the rains in Benares,’ became sad and upset. Then King Kikī said to the Buddha Kassapa, ‘Sir, do you have another supporter better than me?’

‘Great king, there is a market town named Vebhaliṅga, where there’s a potter named Ghaṭikāra. He is my chief supporter. Now, great king, you thought, “The Buddha does not accept my invitation to reside for the rains in Benares,” and you became sad and upset. But Ghaṭikāra doesn’t get upset, nor will he.

Ghaṭikāra has gone for refuge to the Buddha, the teaching, and the Saṅgha. He doesn’t kill living creatures, steal, commit sexual misconduct, lie, or take alcoholic drinks that cause negligence. He has experiential confidence in the Buddha, the teaching, and the Saṅgha, and has the ethics loved by the noble ones. He is free of doubt regarding suffering, its origin, its cessation, and the practice that leads to its cessation. He eats in one part of the day; he’s celibate, ethical, and of good character. He has set aside gems and gold and rejected gold and money. He’s put down the shovel and doesn’t dig the earth with his own hands. He takes what has crumbled off by a riverbank or been dug up by mice, and brings it back in a carrier. When he has made a pot, he says, “Anyone may leave bagged sesame, mung beans, or chickpeas here and take what they wish.” He looks after his blind old parents. And since he has ended the five lower fetters, Ghaṭikāra will be reborn spontaneously and will become extinguished there, not liable to return from that world.

This one time, great king, I was staying near the market town of Vebhaliṅga. Then I robed up in the morning and, taking my bowl and robe, went to the home of Ghaṭikāra’s parents, where I said to them, “Excuse me, where has Ghaṭikāra gone?”

“Your supporter has gone out, sir. But take rice from the pot and sauce from the pan and eat.” So that’s what I did. And after eating I got up from my seat and left.

Then Ghaṭikāra went up to his parents and said, “Who took rice from the pot and sauce from the pan, ate it, and left?”

“It was the Buddha Kassapa, my dear.”

Then Ghaṭikāra thought, “I’m so fortunate, so very fortunate, in that the Buddha Kassapa trusts me so much!” Then joy and happiness did not leave him for a fortnight, or his parents for a week.

Another time, great king, I was staying near that same market town of Vebhalinga. Then I robed up in the morning and, taking my bowl and robe, went to the home of Ghaṭikāra’s parents, where I said to them, “Excuse me, where has Ghaṭikāra gone?”

“Your supporter has gone out, sir. But take porridge from the pot and sauce from the pan and eat.” So that’s what I did. And after eating I got up from my seat and left.

Then Ghaṭikāra went up to his parents and said, “Who took porridge from the pot and sauce from the pan, ate it, and left?”

“It was the Buddha Kassapa, my dear.”

Then Ghaṭikāra thought, “I’m so fortunate, so very fortunate, to be trusted so much by the Buddha Kassapa!” Then joy and happiness did not leave him for a fortnight, or his parents for a week.

Another time, great king, I was staying near that same market town of Vebhalinga. Now at that time my hut leaked. So I addressed the mendicants,

“Mendicants, go to Ghaṭikāra’s home and find some grass.”

When I said this, those mendicants said to me, “Sir, there’s no grass there, but his workshop has a grass roof.”

“Then go to the workshop and strip the grass.” So that’s what they did.

Then Ghaṭikāra’s parents said to those mendicants, “Who’s stripping the grass from the workshop?”

“It’s the mendicants, sister. The Buddha’s hut is leaking.”

“Take it, sirs! Take it, my dears!”

Then Ghaṭikāra went up to his parents and said, “Who stripped the grass from the workshop?”

“It was the mendicants, dear. It seems the Buddha’s hut is leaking.”

Then Ghaṭikāra thought, “I’m so fortunate, so very fortunate, to be trusted so much by the Buddha Kassapa!” Then joy and happiness did not leave him for a fortnight, or his parents for a week.

Then the workshop remained with the sky for a roof for the whole three months, but no rain fell on it. And that, great king, is what Ghaṭikāra the potter is like.’

‘Ghaṭikāra the potter is fortunate, very fortunate, to be so trusted by the Buddha Kassapa.’

Then King Kikī sent around five hundred cartloads of rice, soft saffron rice, and suitable sauce to Ghaṭikāra. Then one of the king’s men approached Ghaṭikāra and said, ‘Sir, these five hundred cartloads of rice, soft saffron rice, and suitable sauce have been sent to you by King Kikī of Kāsī. Please accept them.’

‘The king has many duties, and much to do. I have enough. Let this be for the king himself.’

Ānanda, you might think: ‘Surely the brahmin student Jotipāla must have been someone else at that time?’ But you should not see it like this. I was the student Jotipāla at that time.”

That is what the Buddha said. Satisfied, Venerable Ānanda was happy with what the Buddha said.
